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**AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO AND ELIZABETH de la TRINITÉ
A CONVERSATION ACROSS THE CENTURIES**

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's
University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Arts in Theology with a Concentration in Systematics.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

March 5, 2008

APPENDIX 2: FORM FOR DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE

This Paper was written under the direction of

Signature of Director

Sr. Helen Rolfson, OSF

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**APPENDIX 3: FORM FOR LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY
REQUIREMENT**

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has successfully demonstrated the use of

French

in this paper.

Signature of Director

Sr. Helen Rolfson, OSF

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APPENDIX 4: FORM FOR RESEARCH DISCLOSURE

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**AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO AND ELIZABETH de la TRINITÉ
A CONVERSATION ACROSS THE CENTURIES**

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Date

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO AND ELIZABETH de la TRINITÉ A CONVERSATION ACROSS THE CENTURIES

He who is thus renewed by daily progressing in the knowledge of God and holiness of truth, is converting the direction of his love from the temporal to the eternal, from visible to intelligible things, from carnal to spiritual things, trying assiduously to control and reduce the desire for the former and to bind himself by love to the latter. All his success in this depends on divine assistance; for it is God's word that "without me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5)

Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity: Book Fourteen, Chapter Eight*.¹

O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to be utterly forgetful of self so as to be rooted in you, as changeless and calm as if I were already in eternity. May nothing disturb my peace or draw me out of you, my unchangeable One, but at every moment may I penetrate ever more deeply into the depths of your mysteries:

Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Notes Intimes 15*.²

These two entries, one by Augustine, whom many consider the father of the Latin Church and the other, by a lesser known 20th century Carmelite nun, share a remarkable sense of living one's life on earth in the awareness that life is nothing less than a participation in God's eternal life. How is it that the giant of western theology and a 20th century mystic can have anything to say to each other? This paper will attempt to answer that question and to also assess how a mystical Christianity can still be a practical way to live the Christian life. Far from being esoteric, mystic Christianity can be a powerful witness to God's being present in the "here and now."

This paper makes some assumptions. The first is that mystical experiences, while not common in the lives of most Christian believers, are also not so uncommon as to be considered

1. Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. *LIGHT FROM LIGHT: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001, 68.

2. Jennifer Moorcraft, *He is My Heaven: The Life of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2001), 107.

strange, bizarre or some similar descriptor common to 21st century audiences. Mysticism is not to be relegated to charismatic experience and language, but rather to the more central language of a “personal encounter with God.”

A second assumption is that Trinitarian language may be the perfect home for this experience. Often referred to using words like “mystery,” Trinitarian language (God-talk if you will) may be the best way to talk about mysticism. And who better than the Doctor of the Church, Augustine, to give us the language to use. Augustine’s own mysticism has long been an issue for debate. Many theologians are more comfortable talking about him as “setting the stage” to talk about mysticism rather than talking about his own mystical experiences which are often limited to his and Monica’s vision at Ostia. It is my contention that he does both.

EXPERIENCING A TRIUNE GOD: SIMILARITIES IN EXPERIENCES

Traditionally, Augustine’s description of the Trinity is that of a participation of divine beings, Father, Son and Spirit, co-habiting in a circle with the Father’s and Son’s love for each other being expressed in the person of the Holy Spirit. That Triune God is made available to humanity through grace, and Augustine contends that it is natural for humanity to know and search for God just as it is also natural for mankind to know there was once a relationship to God that was perfect before the fall. How is it that humanity is invited to participate in the life of God? Is that something that happens in the “here and now,” or is it reserved for the after-life in heaven? Clearly, if our definition for mysticism implies having an experience of God in this life, then we need to explore what Augustine has to say about that possibility.

Augustine uses the human soul as his starting point. He contends the human soul desires

to return to its origin (God) through contemplation. The human soul is able to find the image of God not only because it can “remember itself, understand itself, and love itself” but also because it can remember, understand and love the One who is its creator.”³ That language situates the image of God at the heart of his human creation. It is not an appendage, it is core.

The Christian, in Augustine’s Trinitarian theology, has been called a “convalescent,” meaning that his knowledge of God is extant but incomplete, awaiting the free gift of God’s grace to heal and restore it. Even though all humanity is responsible and shares personally in the affects of the fall, all are also called through grace to restore a right personal relationship with God and neighbor they remember interiorly and so know it to be possible.

All of this makes solid, even if abstract, theology; but one has to ask if Augustine had anything to say about a personal experience of grace and of the Triune God. For that, we look for clues in his writings. Trinitarian scholar, Catherine LaCugna, presents a brief outline of Augustinian thought to be found in his *De Trinitate*. In her book *GOD FOR US: The Trinity and Christian Life*, she cites Books 11-15 as places where Augustine relates the image of the Trinity in human souls to the reintegration of the soul into God. This line from *De Trinitate* 15.23.43 is particularly helpful, “Nonetheless in our own personal economies we can **contemplate the image of God in us, be transformed into a more perfect image, and thereby be united with the Trinity itself.** [emphasis mine].⁴ Augustine uses the word contemplate, often used by mystics to describe the search for God, to describe the process that can result in

3. Miguel Diaz, “Augustine and the Economy of the Soul,” Lecture notes from Introduction to the Christian Tradition THY 402, Saint John’s University, Collegeville, MN. Summer 2005.

4. Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991, 95

a uniting of the human and divine. That theology begins to sound more personal.

Augustine's own description of the vision at Ostia is found in Book IX (23-24) of his *CONFESSIONS*. He and Monica were resting after a journey, intending to recover strength to continue their journey, while discussing the kind of eternal life the saints were likely to have. Augustine is clear that this conversation occurred "in the presence of the truth which is you yourself,"⁵ in other words, what mystics would later call in the presence of God. The words he uses to describe his and Monica's experience are clearly mystical.

Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food. **There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and which will be. [emphasis mine]**⁶

Augustine ends this vision section by saying the wisdom he and Monica gained through it was itself eternal, belonging neither to the past nor to the future. Analyzing the key points then, one would come to an understanding that the vision started in love of God (*ardent affection*), advanced past customary things (*corporeal objects*) until arriving at a vision of God's wisdom (*inexhaustible abundance of truth*). That place, according to Augustine, is a place of the heart – a sacred place for many mystics. These passages from his *CONFESSIONS* contradict those who claim Augustine's mysticism is sketchy. In fact, his description mirrors a traditional definition of mystical experience as "a special, deep experience of union with and knowledge of the divine reality, freely granted by God."⁷ Having had this personal experience of God, it becomes

5. Henry Chadwick (trans.), *SAINT AUGUSTINE CONFESSIONS*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 170.

6. *Ibid.*, 171.

7. Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G Farrugia, S.J., *A CONCISE DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 169.

nearly impossible to think that it would not have informed his basic thinking about Trinitarian theology.

What similarities can be found in Augustine's vision of God at Ostia and that of Elizabeth of the Trinity several centuries later, and what importance did these mystical experiences have in developing Trinitarian thought for each?

THE SAINT OF THE DIVINE INDWELLING

Elizabeth Catez, later called Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, was born July 18, 1880, into a military family in France. A popular and musically talented youngster, she was attracted to a religious vocation at age fourteen, a direction opposed by her mother who saw for her the prospects of marriage and a musical career. Deeply influenced by the letters of St. Paul and her own commitment to "holiness as everyone's duty," she persisted in her desire for the religious life, entering the Carmel at Dijon, France, where she developed a mystical awareness and conviction of God's constant presence within her as a sign of his great love.

In the introduction to her book, *THE DOCTRINE OF THE DIVINE INDWELLING*, the Rev. Merè M. Amabel du Coeur de Jésus, says that Elizabeth of the Trinity's embracing of the doctrine of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity, is fundamental in a theology she shared with St. Paul, the Church's early Fathers, particularly Augustine, and mystics including Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross.⁸ In Elizabeth's own words, this indwelling was the certainty that God lived in her very being. As early as May 1901, even before entering the monastery at Carmel, Elizabeth wrote the following in a letter to her friend Marguerite Gallot whom she had met there

8. Rev. Mère M. Amabel du Coeur de Jésus [Carmel de Rochefort], *The Doctrine of the Divine Indwelling: A Commentary on the Prayer of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity*. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950, 17.

That presence of God in the hidden sanctuary within us is good. We find him there always, even when we don't feel him present, for he is there all the same, perhaps even closer then, as you say. I love to search for him there. Let us never leave him alone, that our lives may be a continual prayer.⁹

The truth of the matter was that Elizabeth, in her first years as a Carmelite, might have done serious damage to her health due to the intensity of her private prayer without the intervention of her reverend mother. For example, her devotion to praying on her knees led to her developing synovitis of the knee, her prayer to participate in Christ's passion by sharing the pain of his crown of thorns caused her to suffer from severe headaches for two years, and her loss of sleep resulting from the wearing of a prized secret possession, a hair shirt, came to an end only after the reverend mother demanded that she stop those practices and ask God for healing.

Elizabeth belongs to the Carmelite tradition, stretching back to other mystics like Thérèse of Lisieux, calling believers to a simpler notion of contemplation of God – moving beyond much of contemporary society's preoccupation with psychology and self to a “well of pure contemplation” that she saw as the innermost source and mover of all life in the Church.¹⁰

The charism, or spiritual focus, of the Carmelite Order is contemplative prayer, and since the order is under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, it has a strong Marian devotion. Given the order's charism, special devotion to Mary, and a rule (the eremitic Rule of St. Albert which is one of the shortest of the Rules of consecrated life – closer to the Dominican spiritual tradition that included instances of mystical union and a deeply personal, intimate relationship with God than other orders)¹¹, and with no particular emphasis on Trinitarian

9. Moorcraft, 59.

10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux & Elizabeth of the Trinity*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 373.

11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmelite_Rule_of_St._Albert, accessed 05-Dec-07.

thought or theology – how is it the Elizabeth came to be absorbed by a life in the Trinity? From whom did she get direction/inspiration? For answers we look for clues in her own writing.

FORMALIZING A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Even though Augustine’s experience of God with Monica at Ostia has to be viewed as a personal encounter with God, in general, Augustine’s Trinitarian philosophy can be easily thought of in the abstract level of theological principles rather than lived faith experience. Elizabeth of the Trinity’s experience of the Triune God couldn’t be more different or more personal.

Elizabeth, like other Carmelite sisters before her, had committed her life to a single-minded adoration of God. Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar saw her as a woman who was content to contemplate God simply, allowing for only a single thought for which she could leave everything else behind. In the end, Balthasar said she lived “under the shadow of the Holy Spirit and his final illumination of the mystery of incarnation and redemption, his conclusive glorification of the Trinity’s redemptive history.”¹²

It was in August 1906, with only three months more to live, that Elizabeth wrote the first of her four spiritual treatises as a “surprise” for her sister Guite. Knowing the inevitability of her own death, coupled with her intense longing to see God, Elizabeth organized these *Letters from Carmel* as a ten-day retreat that Carmelites made each year. Its purpose was to show Guite that spiritual union with God is possible for everyone since the Trinity has opened a dwelling place in each person at the time of baptism. The title given to the work by Elizabeth’s prioress was “*How to Find Heaven on Earth*” (later shortened to “*Heaven on Earth*”), and was to have been

12. Moorcraft, 375.

the answer to one who “had begged her [Elizabeth] to initiate her into the secret of the interior life.”¹³

The spiritual “surprise” for her sister was not an academic treatise, but rather a personal souvenir for a sister. As such, it freely used other mystical sources if Elizabeth felt they had said better what she had in mind. For her to use these sources is not “an indication of lack of inventiveness but a richness of listening.”¹⁴ The author who appears most often is the Dutch mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec, for whom the Trinity is the very essence of the spiritual life. Having already successfully introduced her sister to the mystical works of St. John of the Cross, Elizabeth was excited to share her enthusiasm for Ruusbroec with her, too. Curiously, Elizabeth’s treatise, when first published in the 1915 edition of *Souvenirs* was stripped of all quotations from Ruusbroec, a situation that continued with subsequent editions until 1942, when the Ruusbroec texts were restored.

In her last letter to her sister, Elizabeth offers two daily prayers describing the interior life in the Trinity of her imagined last retreat. Most of these reflections are based on scripture, but several refer to her reading of John of the Cross and Ruusbroeck. The first day’s prayer describes the divine indwelling as a place where God is hidden yet present already in eternal time.

By baptism, says St. Paul, we have been united to Jesus Christ. You are no longer guests or strangers, but you belong to the City of saints and the House of God. The Trinity – this is our dwelling, our “home,” the Father’s house that we must never leave.¹⁵

13. Elizabeth of the Trinity, *I HAVE FOUND GOD: Complete Works, Vol I: General Introduction and Major Spiritual Writings trans by Sister Aletheia Kane, O.C.D.* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1984), 90.

14. *Ibid.*, 88

15. *Ibid.*, 94.

There are no specific references to Ruusbroeck in the first day's prayer, but by the second day references are repetitions – two on day two and three, six on day four, and at least two (but as many as seven) Ruusbroeck references in each of the succeeding days, with the exception of the eighth day where there are none.¹⁶ A summary of Ruusbroeck's Trinitarian thought used so liberally by Elizabeth will be useful in determining what her own Trinitarian thought looked like.

Ruusbroeck's theology is a balanced synthesis of God's outflowing transcendent love and of humankind's potentiality for harmonious ascent to union with God. For Ruusbroeck, the human being is fundamentally oriented toward the triune God, whom he sees at once as indivisibly one and threefold, in constant tension between activity and essence. The father, in knowing himself, creates relationships; expressing himself in his Son. The Holy Spirit flows forth from this reciprocal beholding of Father and Son.¹⁷ That definition of Trinity sounds very much like Augustine's idea of the Trinity as a community of love.

That can be compared with Elizabeth's idea of "divine indwelling." Rev. Amabel du Coeur de Jésus, in his book *THE DOCTRINE OF THE DIVINE INDWELLING* credits John of the Cross with the original dogma of divine indwelling, which Elizabeth came to believe. John of the Cross talks of the "initial union of the soul with God present within it" as the basic reality of divine indwelling.¹⁸ The indwelling described by John of the Cross differs from indwelling made possible by God's grace, but is rather a possession by God of the individual in communication.

In thus allowing God to work in it, the soul is at once illumined and transformed in God, and God communicates to it His supernatural being, in such wise that it appears to be

16. Ibid, 115-120.

17. Albert Ampe, "Jan van Ruusbroec," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., 7948-49.

18. Amabel du Coeur de Jésus, *THE DOCTRINE OF THE DIVINE INDWELLING: A*

God Himself, and all that God himself has. ¹⁹

Compare that thought from John of the Cross with Elizabeth's famous exhortation to the Trinity Whom I Adore which started this paper, and it is clear both John and Elizabeth share a vision of the Trinity (God) as dwelling within human beings. This is a personal Trinity that makes a home in the individual. It is a Trinity with whom communication is not only possible, it's easy and possible constantly. This is a mystical Trinity that exists beyond anything an individual can do to summon it – it simply is and is present always.

The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* includes this brief mention of Elizabeth's life and theology that adds context to her short faith-filled life, giving a nod to Teresa of Avilla's influence in Elizabeth's own spiritual development.

L'itinéraire spirituel d'Élisabeth de la Trinité se présente en une merveilleuse continuité et unité: elle demeure avant tout l'âme en qui habite la Trinité et sa vocation suprême de « louange de gloire de la Trinité » se situe dans la ligne de cette grâce fondamentale. A 19 ans, la lecture d'un ouvrage de sainte Thérèse d'Avila dont sa mère était une grande admiratrice, devait jouer un rôle d'éveil à la présence divine au plus intime de son âme. Élisabeth relate dans son *Journal*: « Je lis en ce moment le *Chemin de la perfection*. Cela m'intéresse énormément » (*Écrits*, p. 39). Il est surtout un chapitre qui a retenu son attention et l'a illuminée pour toujours, le commentaire sur ces paroles du « Notre Père » : « *qui êtes aux cieux* » Élisabeth y découvre ce qui constituera l'intuition-clé de sa voie spirituelle : une vie d'intimité avec Dieu *au dedans*. La lecture du *Chemin de la perfection* inaugure cette prise de conscience de l'habitation divine. Non seulement Élisabeth fait ainsi sienne l'intuition centrale de la mystique thérésienne, dont nous retrouvons le développement le plus évolué dans la septième demeure du *Château de l'âme*, mais elle lui emprunte, littéralement, des formules qui lui deviendront familières et qui reviennent dans son *Journal* comme résolutions pratiques : « Que rien ne puisse me distraire de Vous; que ma vie soit une oraison continuelle! Quand j'assiste à ces réunions, à ces fêtes, ma consolation est de *me recueillir*, de jouir de votre Présence » (*Retrait*, 23 janvier 1900, p. 40). « Que je ne vive qu'*au dedans*, dans cette cellule que vous bâtissez en mon Coeur, dans ce petit coin de mon-même où je vous sens si bien » (*Retrait*, 24 janvier 1900, p. 41). Elle retiendra surtout l'une des expressions synthétiques

19. Albert Ampe, "Jan van Ruusbroec," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., 7948-49.

de la mystique thérésienne : « *Dans le ciel de mon âme* ». Nous la retrouverons de plus en plus profondément vécue à toutes les étapes de l'itinéraire spirituel.²⁰

Doctrine spirituelle et rayonnement. – Avec le mystère de l'habitation divine nous sommes au centre de sa doctrine comme de sa vie. Tout rayonne de là : *La contition fondamentale* de cette vie intérieure : l'ascèse du silence et du recueillement, la mort mystique à tout le créé et à toutes les passions qui viendraient agiter l'âme et la détourner par leur vacarme de son office de pure louange; *les actes essentiels* de cette vie au dedans: *croire* à l'Amour et « se perdre en Ceux qui sont là par l'*adoration de l'amour*, dans une *fidélité absolue* aux moindres vouloirs de Dieu; *le modèle supreme* de cette vie divine : le Verbe incarné, parfaite louange de gloire du Père, dont nous devons exprimer tout le mystère comme en une « humanité de surcroît » en laquelle il puisse renouveler tout son mystère, à l'*imitation de la Vierge* de l'incarnation, adoratrice du Verbe, toute recueillie en Dieu au dedans; *le terme* définitive de cette vie spirituelle : l'incessante louange des bienheureux dans le ciel, décrite dans les derniers chapitres de l'Apocalypse devenus sa lecture préférée. Cette doctrine spirituelle, à son stade le plus évolué, est ramassée dans les deux retraites composées à la fin sa vie et qui nous livrent à la fois son testament spirituel et sa manière personnelle de concevoir l'union transformante. La mission spirituelle d'Élisabeth demeure dans la plus pure ligne de sa vocation de carmélite : ramener le monde moderne au silence de Dieu. Elle-même, quelques jours avant de mourir, écrivait en confidence ces pages prophétiques : « Il me semble qu'au ciel ma mission sera d'attirer les âmes en les aidant à sortir d'elles-mêmes pour adhérer à

20. Marie-Michel Philipon and André Rayex, ÉLIZABETH DE LA TRINITÉ, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: Ascétique et mystique doctrine et histoire*, Tome IV, Paris: Beauschesne, 1960, 590.

The spiritual journey of Elizabeth of the Trinity introduces someone whose life is a remarkable continuity and unity: she stands above all as a soul in whom the Trinity dwells, and for her the highest vocation of “praise of the glory of the Trinity” is situated in line with fundamental grace. At 19 years of age, a reading of work of Saint Thérèse of Avila of whom her mother was a great admirer, was to play an awakening role to the presence of the divine at the deepest depths of her spirit. Elizabeth told this in her Journal: “I am reading at present *The Path of Perfection*. That interests me enormously (Writings, p. 39) It is especially to one chapter that my attention returned and it is always illuminating, the commentary on the words of “Our Father” who is in heaven.” Elizabeth there discovered that which makes up the key insight into the spiritual life: a life of intimacy with God *from within*. The reading of *On the Path of Perfection* inaugurated this holding on to an awareness of the divine indwelling. Elizabeth not only made her own ideas the central intention of the mystery of the Trinity, who we rediscover in the development and greatest evolution in the seventh residence of *Castle of the Spirit*, she borrowed from it, literally, the expressions which for it deviated from the familiar but which went back in her *Journal* like practical salutations : “Let nothing have the power to distract me from You, let my life be a constant prayer! When I am present at these meetings, at these festivities, my consolation is of my meditation, to enjoy your Presence” Build in my Heart, in the little corner of myself where I sense you so well” (Retreat, 24 January 1900, p. 41). She will retain especially one of the overall expressions of the Teresan mystery : “*In the Heaven of my Soul*” We rediscover her all the more deeply in the always real stages of her spiritual journey. [translation mine]

Dieu par un mouvement tout simple et tout amoureux, et de les garder en ce grand silence du dedans, qui permet à Dieu s'imprimer en elles, de les transformer en Lui » (à soeur Odile, 28 octobre 1906, p.163).²¹

That is remarkably different from Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, which as has already been noted, is often more abstract, less personal in individual lives. Both Augustine and Elizabeth's Trinity is a community of love, but Elizabeth's is simply a community of love that finds an interior home in people's lives. For Elizabeth, this divine indwelling is the commencement of beatitude – heaven in faith – the heaven of pure love, referred to by Augustine as *habitamus et habitamur*, “we shall dwell in God, and God in us.”²² After all these centuries, on that these two holy ones can agree.

21. Ibid., 591-592.

Spiritual doctrine and influence – With the mystery of the divine indwelling we are at the center of her life's belief. The most influential of that being:

The fundamental condition of that interior view is: silent asceticism and meditation; the mystical death to all creatures and passions that can result in a restless soul diverted by noise from fulfilling its true function of praise; the essential acts of this interior life are: to believe in Love and “to lose oneself in Those who are “by adoration and love, in absolute faithfulness to the smallest wishes of God, the supreme model of of that divine life: the Word incarnate, in perfect praise of the glory of the Father, in whom we owe expression of all the mystery like in a state of “anxious humanity” in whom we might renew all his mysteries, to the imitation of the Virgin of the incarnation, adoration of the Word, total meditation on God inside us; the final time limit of this spiritual life is: continual praise (given by) the blessed of heaven, as described in the last chapters of the Apocalypse that became preferred reading. This spiritual doctrine, at this last stage of evolution is collected in the two retreat compositions at the end of and delivered to us a her spiritual testament and her personal manner of conceiving of the transformative union.

The spiritual mission of Elizabeth lives in most pure line of her vocation as a Carmelite : to bring the modern world back to the silence of God. She herself, a few days before dying, was to write confidently these prophetic pages: “It seems to me my heavenly mission will be to attract all souls in helping them to come out of themselves to cling to God by a simple, loving movement, in the great silence within, which allows God's imprint on everyone, to transform them in Him.” (to her sister Odile, 28 October, 1906, p. 163). [*translation mine*]

22. Amabel du Coeur de Jésus, *THE DOCTRINE OF THE DIVINE INDWELLING: A Commentary on the Prayer of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity*, Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950, 17.

MODERN SUPPORT AND CHALLENGES

What both Augustine and Elizabeth seem to be asking is that serious attention be given to the contemplation of the essence of God (as Trinity). Many western Christian's concept of Trinity is heavily influenced by Augustine and their personal experience of the Latin Church. It's an issue that has been tackled by the greatest of modern-day theologians.

For example, Karl Kasper says reflection on the nature of God's essence requires grounding in Biblical texts, including the Old Testament notion of God as not only *being*, but as *being for his chosen people*. He says it's not sufficient to claim a God whose essence is un-generated and primordial, beyond that which we can know, even though all of those statements are true. This God wants a relationship with his people, a relationship similar to the relationship of love that defines the communion/community of Father, Son, and Spirit. Elizabeth becomes a particularly potent example of that kind of love relationship.

And Catherine Mowry LaCugna adds that Augustine's Trinitarian theology is usually characterized by a distinction between mission and processions, the affect of which has been to *defunctionalize* the Trinity by minimizing the relationship of the persons of the Trinity to the economy of salvation. His Trinity is more the relationship of the persons in love, rather than their roles in salvation history. In fact, LaCugna makes Augustine responsible for a permanent rupture between *theologia* and *oikonomia* in the Latin Church. The Latin Church continues to emphasize nature over person in God and unity over Trinity, largely due to the influence of Augustine.

Other western theologians may credit Augustine with much of the Trinitarian dogma of the Latin Church, but they don't agree on all the details. For example, John Cavadini and Michel René Barnes demand more in Augustinian interpretation. Cavadini demands that Christian faith,

not only neo-Platonism be brought to bear in any serious contemplation of Augustine's notion of the Trinity. He says a neo-Platonic ascent to God that is purely introspective will fail unless that attempt to come to a saving knowledge of God also includes faith in Christ.

Barnes goes even further by returning to Augustine's earliest writings on the Trinity. These, he says, show Augustine's basic frame of reference as an appropriation of Nicaea, even rearticulating the creed of Nicaea to show that the unity of the Trinity is found in its inseparable activities or operations which are indicative of and derive from their common nature. That seems to contradict the generally-held view that Augustine's Trinity is the communication of love between Father, Son, and Spirit at the level of substance (*theologia*). Augustine's desire to show unity by the Father and Son performing the same actions (salvation) would also prove their sharing the same natures.

For Augustine, relationality of the persons of God was located in the divine essence. It had little to do with mankind. It was a description of *theologia*, God separated from creation. LaCugna argues this relationality of the Trinity must include humanity. The central issue for Christians is the encounter of human persons and divine persons in the economy of salvation. If one accepts that notion, it has ramifications for how Christians will live their everyday lives.

It is perhaps LaCugna who sites Augustine where he belongs and that is in the "true economy of the individual soul whose interior structure discloses the reality of the Trinity." She says that in the end, Augustine's idea of Trinity isn't a neo-Platonic upward journey to God. Instead it is to be found in "God's economy of redemption and sanctification transpires within the soul of each individual, whose unique internal history bears God's providential plan." That sounds very much like Elizabeth of the Trinity's personal "Trinity that I love."

In the end, what all of these modern-day theologians are asking for is the same thing that Elizabeth did. It is not enough to simply contemplate the essence of God, one has to contemplate that essence in light of what God does out of love for creation in the economy of salvation.

LIVING A TRINITARIAN LIFE

Catherine LaCugna, in her book *God for Us*, says that what matters in the doctrine of the Trinity is to remember that God is *personal*, and the proper way to approach a Trinitarian understanding is to see it as an encounter between divine and human persons in the economy of redemption. Economy is crucial since it is only in God's saving acts that creation has any notion of "how" God is, and the "how" of God gives us clues to "who" God is for us.²³

For Augustine, relationality of the persons of God was located in the divine essence. It had little to do with mankind. His was a description based in *theologia*, God separated from creation. LaCugna argues that relationality of the Trinity must include humanity since the central issue for Christians is the encounter of human persons and divine persons in the economy of salvation. Indeed, this encounter can be mystical, as were Augustine's and Elizabeth's. If one accepts that notion, it has ramifications for how Christians will live their everyday lives.

To understand that better, it's necessary to dig even deeper into the historical understandings of the Trinity. It was the Cappodocian fathers of Asia Minor who first insisted on knowing the "personhood" of God. Person is who God is. It is also how God is. LaCugna says that more contemporary theologians, including Carl Rahner, are also indebted to Augustine and Aquinas for their understanding of Trinity, insisting that one should use the Greek starting point in the monarchy of the Father. Doing so would reintegrate the economy of salvation as the

23. Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991, 243-305

main business of theology. It seems to me this is what Elizabeth of the Trinity says in her devotional prayers to the Trinity inside her.

So it should become clear that living a Trinitarian life requires awareness that human life is a reflection of the life of God, lived most obviously in the Church, and most visibly through participation in the sacraments. LaCugna simplifies the situation even further by saying there are not two sets of communion – one among divine persons and another among human persons. There is only one communion that includes God and humanity in the economy of salvation.

But it may be Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware who makes the strongest case for the Trinity as an icon for human relationships. In an article entitled, “The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity,” which is clearly pastoral in tone, he argues that just as the persons of the Trinity exist in relationship for each other, in one unity, so is it that humans are to live in relationship for each other. Just as it is only possible to find God within an interpersonal communion of co-equal persons, so to is it only possible for humans to respond to the needs of the “other” by living in a communion of love (*communio*) that calls for the **all** of humanity, not just me or me and you, but all living in communion with the Triune God and each other.²⁴

CONCLUSION

This paper began with the assumption that mystical experience of God provides both the event and the language to talk about God in human experience. It also assumed that Augustine of Hippo’s language from the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. would have something in common with the words and thinking of the 20th century mystic Elizabeth of the Trinity. The path followed in exploring those assumptions has

24. Kallistos T. Ware, “The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity,” 6-21.

- (1) shown that both recorded personal experiences of the presence of God that can be rightly considered to be mystical
- (2) both wrote about the Trinity in similar ways, describing the Trinity in words like a community of love
- (3) both lived Christian lives in a monastic community, though the rules of those communities differed
- (4) Neither was isolated from the thinking of others around them, with Augustine surrounding his thinking with the early Church fathers and Elizabeth being influenced by the thought of people such as Thérèse of Lisieux, John of the Cross, and Jan van Ruusbroeck.

In summary, both appear to be people of their time, aware of the thinking of others around them, and able to use that thinking in centering their own lives in a Triune God. But were both contemplatives in a mystical sense of that word?

One might be tempted to see Elizabeth more than Augustine in this light, and that might be attributed to the accumulation of theological speculation surrounding Augustine over the centuries. Elizabeth's life seems to be so much simpler, but simplicity is not a prerequisite for a mystical life. I like this definition of mysticism, and it may help in coming up with an answer.

Mysticism. A special, **deep of union with and knowledge of the divine reality**, freely granted by God. Mystical experiences which may be accompanied by ecstasy, **visions**, and other phenomena are usually preceded by the **serious practice of contemplation and asceticism**. While found in the great religions of the world, mysticism in Christian experience has a **highly personal quality**, enhancing rather than suppressing the sense of distinction between the mystic and God. Genuine mysticism always produces **more generous love toward others** and seems to be found frequently among Christians who are dedicated to prayer and sensitive to God's presence in their lives. [**emphasis mine**] ²⁵

25. Gerald O'Collins, S.J., and Edward G Farrugia, S.J., *A CONCISE DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 169.

That definition applies equally to Augustine and to Elizabeth. The deep union and knowledge of God are clearly articulated in the writings of both, the personal nature of this knowledge is always apparent in Elizabeth, but equally so in Augustine's description of his vision at Ostia. Elizabeth's writing talks of love toward others, but more often she speaks of her love for God and God's love for her. That language finds a receptive home in Augustine's definition of the Trinity as a community of love.

In the forward to the 1992 edition of *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, Hans Urs von Balthasar has this to say about Elizabeth of the Trinity and another Carmelite who died at a young age, Thérèse of Lisieux. His comments bring our discussion of their lives into a spiritual, rather than academic, milieu. One suspects this is where both would like the discussion to end.

Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity, who died at the age of twenty-four and twenty-six respectively, understood the act of total surrender to the Triune God as the highest possible form of engagement on behalf of the world's salvation. Their common concern is to devote their lives entirely to the reality of faith, to live "theological existences." Thérèse is subjectively stronger. Elizabeth knows her and builds on her but it is in Elizabeth, the one who is subjectively weaker and objectively stronger, that contemplative faith expands to its full biblical dimensions.²⁶

26. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *TWO SISTERS IN THE SPIRIT: Therese of Lisieux & Elizabeth of the Trinity*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, 11.

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